

ROLL CALL

CSIS Commission Shows Parties Can Work Together

December 20, 2007

*By Rep. Mac Thornberry,
Special to Roll Call*

One of my greatest challenges is going to my district in Texas and talking about what is happening in Washington without leaving the folks back home in despair. Listening to the news these days, it seems that the only thing happening on Capitol Hill is partisan argument. If one side says "yes," the other side says "no," before they even know what the subject is.

There is too much partisanship on just about every issue, yet that is not the whole story. You may not hear as much about it, but there also are pockets of bipartisan collaboration.

One example is the Commission on Smart Power. Formed by the Center for Strategic and International Studies, the commission was chaired by Harvard professor Joseph Nye and former Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage. Its members were a diverse group of Republicans and Democrats with wide experience in and out of government. Its charge was developing a vision and some specific recommendations to help the next administration and Congress successfully meet the national security challenges of the 21st century. Its report was adopted unanimously — no easy task in today's environment.

"Smart power" refers to effective integration of hard power, such as military and economic actions, with soft power, which involves methods of persuasion and includes things like culture and diplomacy. Effective influence in today's world can depend on image and inspiration as much as military strength. Smart power recognizes that the United States needs both.

The commission recognized that American standing in the world has suffered in recent times. We agreed that five key areas need attention: alliances and institutions, international development, public diplomacy, economic integration and innovation.

While the U.S. must always maintain the ability to make decisions that are vital to our national interests on our own, it also is in our interests to engage with others in alliances and in international institutions. As frustrating as multilateralism can be, working with other nations is preferable to working against them. Next, we should make a new, stronger commitment to global development. Effective aid — and more of it — not only saves and improves lives, it helps create hope in a better future, which reduces the breeding grounds for terrorism and unrest.

Third, we must significantly improve our communication with the peoples of other nations. Whether it is called public diplomacy or strategic communication, U.S. interests can be advanced with thoughtful communication efforts. Such communication starts with listening and understanding and extends to foreign exchanges and the design of our embassies.

Globalization has changed the way that economies interact, but trade need not be a zero-sum game. The commission came down strongly for free, unrestricted trade that can "lift all boats," along with assistance for those American workers who are adversely affected.

Finally, America must emphasize one of the key ingredients to our success — innovation. Our leadership in technology gives us a unique opportunity to help set global standards and to pioneer new forms of clean energy.

None of the policy recommendations in the commission report can work without a competent government able to implement them. Most people do not believe that the federal government works efficiently or handles problems well. Whether it is border security, Hurricane Katrina, Iraq reconstruction or issuing passports, there is ample evidence to support the view of government incompetence. There is even more evidence to lead one to question whether government agencies can work together on complex problems. The commission added its voice to the growing chorus calling for government institutional reform.

The Commission on Smart Power has demonstrated that Republicans and Democrats can work together after all. Our report, which was distributed to Members' offices this week, offers policymakers specific recommendations consistent with a more promising vision for the future. The question now is, will Members actually read it?

Rep. Mac Thornberry (R-Texas) is a member of the bipartisan Center for Strategic & International Studies Commission on Smart Power.

Copyright 2007 © Roll Call Inc. All rights reserved.